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## A reply to P. A. M. Seuren, 'Saussure and his intellectual environment'

John E. Joseph, University of Edinburgh

A recent article in this journal by Pieter Seuren<sup>1</sup> takes issue with numerous things that I am supposed to have said. Some of them I did not in fact say. It is an honour to have Seuren devote his energy to commenting on my work, even when we disagree, but it is regrettable that the special issue in which the article appeared did not undergo a more robust editorial process that might have spotted what are at best inaccuracies, and at times report quite the opposite of what I have maintained. I will not try to correct all of the inaccuracies, but three or four are straightforward enough that I think it is worth setting the record straight for the benefit of students and others who might consult the article.

A sentence on p. 28 misrepresents what I have written concerning Saussure and Victor Henry, 'who, according to Joseph ('Undoubtedly a powerful influence'), exerted a major influence on Saussure's thought'. The phrase 'undoubtedly a powerful influence' was not mine, but Roman Jakobson's; I took the quote as the main title for an article in which I explained why it was not true, and explored Jakobson's particular reasons for wanting to interpret Saussure in a way that made it tempting for him to overstate the link to Henry.<sup>2</sup> I am then quoted as saying that 'The echo of Henry's *Antinomies linguistiques* is unmistakable'<sup>3</sup> – but this has been pulled out of context in a way that suggests I am making a blanket statement about Saussure's linguistics, when in fact I am commenting on a one-off use by Saussure of the word *antinomie*, noting that it was not part of his usual vocabulary and that his library contains a copy of Henry's *Antonomies linguistiques* with a personal inscription from the author.

On the same page I am quoted as saying with regard to Vilfredo Pareto, a renowned economist who wrote frequently on economic issues for the *Journal de Genève*, that 'Some have seen in his work a possible inspiration for remarks on "political economy" that Saussure would make in his lectures on general linguistics'.<sup>4</sup> I am then criticised for maintaining that Pareto influenced Saussure, despite the lack of evidence. I had thought it was clear that the phrase 'Some have seen in his work' gives the authorial distancing that precisely does *not* endorse what is to follow.<sup>5</sup>

Earlier in the article it is stated that Adolphe Pictet is 'seen by Joseph as the major intellectual influence on Saussure' (p. 11). No, he assuredly is not. I suspect this may be a distortion of something quoted further on in his article, about the role Pictet played as a mentor to the adolescent Saussure: 'The key formative figure in the intellectual life of the young Ferdinand de Saussure was Adolphe Pictet (1799–1875), a family friend best remembered for his *Les origines indo-*

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<sup>1</sup> Pieter A. M. Seuren, 'Saussure and his intellectual environment', *History of European Ideas* (2016), DOI: 10.1080/01916599.2016.1154398

<sup>2</sup> John E. Joseph, "'Undoubtedly a powerful influence": Victor Henry's *Antinomies linguistiques* (1896), with an annotated translation of the first chapter', *Language & Communication*, 16, no. 2 (1996), 117–44.

<sup>3</sup> John E. Joseph, *Saussure*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2012), p. 499.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph, *Saussure*, p. 461.

<sup>5</sup> My book identifies a possible link to Saussure's remarks on political economy in Henri Dameth, whose lectures on that subject Saussure may have attended, judging from a letter written by a friend of his, during his time as a student at the University of Geneva. For details and an examination of the overlaps between Dameth's lectures and the economic remarks in the *Cours de linguistique générale* see John E. Joseph, 'Saussure's Value(s)', *Recherches sémiotiques/Semiotic Inquiry* 36 (in press).

*européennes, ou les Aryas primitifs: Essai de paléontologie linguistique* (1859–1863)'.<sup>6</sup> That book first sparked the adolescent Saussure's interest in linguistics, but it did not make Pictet anything like 'the major intellectual influence on Saussure'. I expect most readers will be able to recall who were the key formative intellectual figures in their own youth, and that only in rare cases would they identify them as the major intellectual influence on their life as a whole, if they could identify a single person.

I do not think there was any single 'major intellectual influence' on Saussure. A wide range of people whose work or personal impact helped to shape his ideas are discussed in my biography. They include linguists of earlier generations, such as Pāṇini, Bopp, Ascoli, Whitney; some of his teachers in Geneva; the numerous linguists who taught him in Leipzig and Berlin, including Georg Curtius and the Neogrammarians; his father; and some he encountered in Paris, among them Louis Havet and James Darmesteter, and perhaps Bréal and Baudouin de Courtenay. Saussure was an original thinker, including in his capacity to synthesise in original ways, and original thinkers, unlike acolytes, rarely if ever have one major intellectual influence.

Seuren's critique is a homage to the venerable Hans Aarsleff, seeking to defend Aarsleff in what Seuren calls a 'long-standing and bitter dispute between Aarsleff and Joseph about Saussure's intellectual background' (p. 29). To say 'long-standing' makes it sound like more than just thirteen years have passed since I first raised questions about Aarsleff's identification of Hippolyte Taine as the source of Saussure's conception of language.<sup>7</sup> Nor has the dispute been bitter – certainly not on my part. I have simply said, specifically and in detail, where and why I disagree with Aarsleff, and provided documentary evidence. Aarsleff wrote a response which I consider a thoughtful expansion on his original argument, and a tacit acknowledgment that it could do with some expanding and tempering.<sup>8</sup> I hope that anyone interested will have a good look at what Aarsleff and I wrote, and make their own judgement.

Seuren refers to 'a recent spate of publications [...] attempting to restyle Saussure as being rooted in romanticist, not rationalist, thought' (p. 4, n. 9), among which he includes my work. So far as I am aware, this 'romanticist' thing is Seuren's invention; I myself have never written anything suggesting it. To start with, the dichotomy itself is highly dubious. Romanticism means many things to many people, and Seuren never says what it means to him. He does however identify the *grammaire générale* tradition as 'the farewell call of the old rationalism in linguistics' (p. 7) – yet neglects to mention a key point established in Joseph, *Saussure*: that Saussure's education, through historical circumstances peculiar to Geneva, came at the tail end of a protracted survival of the *grammaire générale* tradition there, long after it ceased to be taught in France. It included sign theory, very much in the form in which Saussure would later teach it when he was called upon to give lectures in general linguistics. The view put forward in my book could be characterised in Seuren's terms as holding that the disjuncture that exists between what Saussure says about signs on the one hand, and about the language system on the other, comes down to his being 'rooted' in a 'rationalist'

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<sup>6</sup> John E. Joseph, 'Pictet's *Du beau* (1856) and the crystallisation of Saussurean linguistics', *Historiographia Linguistica*, 30, no. 3 (2003), 365-88, p. 368.

<sup>7</sup> Hans Aarsleff, 'Taine and Saussure', *Yale Review*, 68 (1978), 71-81, reprinted in Aarsleff, *From Locke to Saussure: Essays on the study of language and intellectual history*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; London: Athlone (1982) 356-65.

<sup>8</sup> Hans Aarsleff, 'Duality the key', *Times Literary Supplement* 20 August 2004.

semiotic tradition on the one hand, and on the other a 'Romantic' view of language as a quasi-natural system, which is shared by the Neogrammarian approach and the 'naturalist' one that was taken in its time to be its opposite. But I am genuinely uncertain whether this accords with the sense in which Seuren uses 'rationalist' and 'romanticist'.

Seuren's article includes a substantial section (p. 18) laying out why 'influence' is a problematic concept, with which I wholly agree. He then goes on for page after page discussing influences! I have always avoided 'influence' as being too loose in meaning and connotation to be a useful part of the argumentative tool-kit of a historian of linguistics or any other discipline. It is inherently unfalsifiable, unless one can show that the person influenced could never have been exposed to the ideas of the influencer. It also sets a high bar for proving that both of them were not independently 'influenced' by someone else.

Having spent untold hours reading through Saussure's surviving papers and those of others in his milieu – something neither Aarsleff's nor Seuren's writings give any indication of their ever having done – I believe that the partial overlap of ideas and terms in the work of Saussure, Taine, Pictet et al. have their source in that *grammaire générale* tradition that was part of their shared educational heritage. To Seuren's credit, he disowns Aarsleff's argument to the extent that it was based on supposed borrowing of terms and specific concepts; but he follows Aarsleff in overstating the uniqueness of Taine in his time. If one day some evidence turns up that Saussure paid any attention to Taine, I shall shout that discovery from the rooftops. It would be fascinating. Until then, I regret that I cannot agree with my friend that links to the people Saussure himself wrote about are 'fanciful', while those to someone in whom he never showed the slightest interest should be taken seriously, particularly when the evidence suggests that, rather than this person 'influencing' that one, we are dealing with people who grew up drinking from the same intellectual stream.